Lateral

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Review of *Plastic Matter* by Heather Davis (Duke University Press)

by Chayne Wild | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Heather Davis's *Plastic Matter* sheds light on the implications of plastic's synthetic universality, inviting readers to reflect critically on their relationship with plastic material and also with matter more generally. She outlines concepts such as plasticity and globalized unlocality, arguing that plastic's ability to take on various forms contribute to ecological disruptions, biological harms, and social inequalities. Davis highlights how plastic is an everyday, ubiquitous material whose harms are unevenly displaced with regards to race, sex, and class; for example, as waste that is continually dumped on the global South. She further details how the systems designed to handle plastic's excesses cannot contain it, leading it to swell out and impact more communities, human and beyond. The book critiques dominant narratives of plastic as an ideal of Enlightenment progress, while emphasizing the complexity of plastic and the ambiguity of its role and our relations with it. But Davis also argues that thinking with plastic invites queer relationships with new kin. Davis thus encourages readers to think beyond plastic's simple ubiquity and to challenge the apparent plasticity of matter.

KEYWORDS capitalism, colonialism, environment, feminism, new materialism, queer, sustainability

Plastic Matter. By Heather Davis. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, 176 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1775-2. US List: $24.95.

Every once in a while, I have an encounter with a book that is so upsetting that it causes me to temporarily disassociate. On return to my body, I find everything anew: engulfed by new sounds, new sights, and new smells. In this way, the familiar is rendered strange again with a fresh sense I can only describe as

seductively nauseating. This was my experience reading Heather Davis's *Plastic Matter*. I feel it is most appropriate to begin my review with an account of the unboxing event itself, as it marks the start of this tenuous encounter between plastic and flesh.

Excited to open the morning mail, I find a neat cardboard package emblazoned with the white shipping label announcing Duke University Press. Impulsively tearing open the cardboard, I immediately break into laughter: The book is wrapped in cellophane. I flip it over to read the publisher's blurb and praise: "Plastic is ubiquitous." "There is no outside of plastic."

I read the preface in which Davis outlines her family's intergenerational entwinement with plastic. Her grandfather worked for the chemical company DuPont Canada and was involved in the initial development of plastic milk bladders: milk, but with the convenience of a sealed unbreakable bag.

The morning swells, crashing into my presence. My toothbrush, the flip-flops I slipped on to check the mail, the packing tape and shipping label, and even my dog's poop bag are all plastic. I nervously finger the book's cover. It has a satin finish that feels not quite just paper. Is it also plastic? I pull out my phone (plastic backing nestled in a plastic protective case) and google it.

From the depths of the ocean to the highest mountains, in the air and water, on and inside our own bodies, "The world is now plastic" (3). But Davis wants us to think beyond the simple ubiquity of plastic as a "terribly mundane material" that is everywhere (1). She argues that plastic transmits a "sense of universality" that she calls, "synthetic universality" (5). Saturating my morning routine and present everywhere, plastic is a universal force. But Davis argues that this force is also synthetic in the sense that endless plasticity erases the differential dislocation of plastic, including the ways that plastic's harms are distributed.

For example, Davis argues that plastic's synthetic universality is a continuation of capitalist and colonial logics, as plastic waste is continually dumped on the global South. The systems to deal with the excesses of plastic production and distribution cannot be contained, so it swells out and ever onward. Davis discusses how plastic is even valuable, in part, as waste, and waste-dumps themselves are constructed as plastic barriers to protect trash from seeping into the environment. Plastic is a mutable, yet containing force.

Containment and recycling efforts fail, Davis notes, but the damages of these failures are not dispersed equally, as they are often imparted along lines of race, sex, and class. She writes that, "plastic is designed to be divorced from a specific location, appearing as if from nowhere and coating particular places in this sense of globalized unlocality" (5). The ease and convenience of plastic materials, like milk bags and book-packaging materials, is also intimately wrapped up in a throwaway culture that renders such dislocation invisible, further extending the process of uneven harm.

Davis's approach throughout this book is to think *with* plastic, as informed by theorists of feminist new materialisms, of art, and of queer agency. She heavily references Jane Bennett, Karan Barad, and Amanda Boetzkes, for example. While Davis is careful not to reproduce "universalizing logics" that are "impressed into plastic itself," she nonetheless argues that there is no distancing from theoretical studies on plastic, and that plastic must be approached by a method that "values and privileges intimacy" (14). Plasticity is everywhere, but it is also always intimately situated and near.

Some of the embodiments of plasticity are even surprisingly generative. She acknowledges, for example, that plastics uniquely reveal the boundlessness of life and the intermeshments of the "queer productivity" of new lifeforms, "for example, on the plastisphere, in the bellies of wax worms, in the generative landscapes of garbage dumps, or in the imagination of poets" (101). Queer

thought can inform new kin and relationships in a world of violence and uncertainty, as plasticity escapes its molds and bounds.

Davis suggests that plasticity preferences the mutability of matter, the "convenience" of throwaway culture, and the "liberating" potential of consumerism. Synthetics like plastic displace their origins and appear to originate from the creative minds of scientists (47). She argues that plastic thus "appears without ontology" (50). Plastics can be molded and shaped to be and do anything. In many ways this renders the harms of plastics invisible.

However, Davis explores plastiglomerate, a synthetic beach debris fused with plastics found in nature. She argues that plastiglomerate is not only evidence of the environmental harms of plastic, but is also an example of plastic escaping human control (60). Since dominating matter and shaping it in man's image are key to the notion of "plasticity," yet plastiglomerate is formed beyond human control and intention, plastiglomerate is paradoxically a plastic that undermines plasticity.

Plastic is also intertwined in communication and mass media. Davis uses photographs as an example here because they are dependent on petrochemicals and plastics. But plastics are also a "particular form" of "biosemiotic" media that communicate harms to bodies via mistranslations as hormones and cancerous cellular division (69). Plastics thus speak in further surprising ways beyond human intention.

Enmeshment with plastics is already beyond our control according to Davis, but such enmeshment nevertheless suggests a need for emphasizing openness and accountability in our dealings with plastic. In other words, the tensions wrought by plastic must be kept alive. Davis links such considerations of the plasticity of matter to Donna Haraway's "response-ability" and Jacques Derrida's "hauntology" to argue that while plastic matter is destructive, it also invites relationship and consideration with queerness, kin, and matter more generally.

While Davis left me in the damage, wondering what to make of plastic as kin, she nonetheless offers insightful analysis here. She fuses theoretical conceptions of entanglement with empirical and artful examples of how plasticity shapes our relationship with the material world. Thinking with plastic invites us to reevaluate our relationships with matter post-Enlightenment, as we must no longer imagine matter as "subservient and dichotomous to the wills and whims of the human mind" (9). Unwrapping *Plastic Matter* thus invited me to reevaluate my own molds, including my morning routine. Scholars across the fields of queer theory, media studies, environmental political theory, and new materialisms will find Davis's *Plastic Matter* similarly inviting and challenging.

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